

## ARABIC CALLIGRAPHY ON MUGHAL MONUMENTS OF NORTH INDIA

<sup>1</sup> Asif Ali and <sup>2</sup> Ahmad Sanusi Hassan  
<sup>1,2</sup> *School of Housing, Building and Planning*  
*Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Penang, Malaysia*

### ABSTRACT

Due to prohibition of figurative representation in Islam, Arabic calligraphy has been a highest form of art on the surface of monuments. Before the advent of Islam, Arabic writings were not having well developed and definite styles, but revelation of Quran in Arabic opened new vistas for Arabic calligraphy. In the early decades of Islam, the Arabic calligraphy first developed to write Holy Quran on leather, bones, leaves, parchment etc. and, later this art became the part of precious objects, paintings and monuments. Along with other forms of art, the Arabic calligraphy also enriched architecture of the Islamic world. With the spread of Islam in different regions of world the art of calligraphy transmitted to new territories and consequently various styles of calligraphy were developed. The early Muslim rulers in India, the Sultans developed this art and later Mughals enriched and flourished it to its peak. The Arabic calligraphic art on Indian monuments are in the form of Quranic verses, Hadith or inscriptions mentioning information regarding monument and its builder. In this paper authors will investigate the visual and aesthetic characteristics of art of Arabic calligraphy in Mughal architecture of North India. The monuments studied here are from three capital cities of Mughal Empire in North India, viz. Agra, Delhi and Fatehpur Sikri. The study shall assist to conserve and restore the calligraphic inscriptions in Mughal buildings as they are deteriorating day by day due to negligence. It will also help designers, architects and calligraphers as calligraphy is still associated as one of the important element of contemporary religious buildings.

**Keywords:** Mughal architecture, calligraphy, History, Mosque, Ornamentation.

### INTRODUCTION

Earliest writings were pictorial and later these symbolic pictures were converted to alphabets in the form of Greek and Aramaic language. Arabic writing came from Nabataean which had been derived from Aramaic while Western writing originated from Greek alphabets. From ancient times human beings tended to make their writings more artistic and communicative which developed the decorative handwriting, called Calligraphy. As a result, in various parts of the world different writing styles developed. Gaur (2006b) states that only three civilizations, Chinese, Western civilization based on Roman scripts and Arab could be considered as true originator of calligraphy. Arabic calligraphy is associated with Arab world and Islamic culture due to revelation of Quran in Arabic. Quran is the holy word of Allah, revealed on the Prophet Mohammad (SAW) through Gabriel over a period of almost twenty three years. Whenever any part of Quran was revealed, the Prophet (SAW) asked to record it to one of the scribes and the verses were used to be written on leaves, bones, leather, stones and papyrus or parchment etc. (Randeree, 1985). Revelation of Quran gave a new status to the Arabic language and script (Gaur, 2006a). In the beginning of Islam, Quran was memorised orally with fewer records, but with the spread of Islam its text was needed to be reached to every Muslim especially for non Arab population. With the invention of paper, Quran was printed on a mass level with different calligraphic styles. First, Makki, Madani and then Basri and Kufic were the early examples of calligraphy (George, 2003). The development of Kufic script provided a base for other kinds of Arabic writing styles. Apart from paper other medium like tiles, ceramics, stone, coins, seals, metal objects, textiles, building facades, arms and armours were also used as a base for calligraphic art (Etikan, 2008). Calligraphy on the surface of buildings was an iconic function and a medium of message and a tool for designers to create identity and spiritual built environment.

Throughout the Islamic architectural history calligraphy had been a highest form of ornamentation. Even in modern time it has been used as decorative element on the exterior surfaces of buildings and as a part of interior design too (Hussein, 2016). These words of God chosen deliberately for a cause appropriate to its location with their aesthetic value. This study will investigate the art of monumental calligraphy during Mughal period in North India. Six representative buildings from three capital cities of Mughal India will be surveyed to find out the stylistic development and techniques used in calligraphy on the surface of the building.

## HISTORY

Though Islam enlightened the Malabar Coast of South India through Arab traders even at the time of Prophet (SAW), but in North India it reached later through Muslim rulers. The early Muslim ruler in North India, Mahmud of Ghazna extended his territory to Western Punjab and further Muhammad Ghori conquered North Gangetic plains. He appointed Qutub al Din Aibak as his general of newly captured domain and returned to Afghanistan. Only after Ghori's death, Aibak declared Delhi Sultanate as an independent territory in 1206AD and established the Slave dynasty in Delhi (Kozlowski, 2000). By that time when Islamic rule was established in North India, Islam had already a five hundred years old culture and heritage rooted in West and Central Asia. Many Islamic arts including calligraphy had already been established in its advanced form. Indians further enhanced this art and its best examples could be seen during Mughal period. In India before the arrival of Muslims, Arabic calligraphy was unknown. The language of Muslim rulers was Arabic, Turkish and Persian but Persian took a position of language of court (Welch, Keshani, & Bain, 2002) while Arabic was used for religious text predominantly. The earliest examples of Arabic calligraphy on monuments could be observed in the first mosque of North India known as Quwwatul Islam mosque and on Qutub Minar. Aibak's successors extended the construction of these buildings and added other monuments like tomb of Iltutmish and Alai Darwaza. All these building have fine examples of monumental calligraphy in Kufic and Naskh style (Figure 1). This legacy of ornamenting the buildings with God's words was continued to the next dynasties and they also contributed to flourish this art. Due to Mongol's political turmoil in Transoxania and Khurasan many scholars, intellectuals and craftsmen migrated to India. This incidence affected the early art work of Islamic monuments in India.

First Mughal ruler, Babur contributed a new style of calligraphy which was named as Khat-e-Baburi, but this style could not get popularity. Babur ruled India for a brief period of time where he built many mosques and gardens. Most of them are now in ruined form. The architecture during his period reflects the style of previous dynasty only. His descendent Humayun was busy most of his tenure in military affairs. Humayun, with his family and army had to flee to Persia and stayed there for almost a decade. During their stay they were very much influenced with Persian art and culture. Sources evidence that he met calligraphers, architects and artists in Herat and invited them to join his court on recapturing India (Alikuzai, 2013). Abul Fazal mentions the twelve names of imperial calligraphers at Akbar's court, one of them was Muhammad Husain who was given a title of 'Zarrin-Qalam' means a golden pen (Edwardes & Garrett, 1995). The calligrapher of Atgah Khan's tomb was Baqi Muhammad of Bukhara, the versus reflects the Atgah Khan's demise, chosen carefully (Asher, 2003). When Akbar shifted his capital to Fatehpur Sikri where he built palaces and a grand mosque, calligrapher Ahmad al Chishti inscribed the Quranic verses on the monuments. Many other Persian painters and calligraphers contributed to Mughal art during sixteenth century like, Mir Ali al-Haravi, Abd al-Samad Shirazi and Aqa Riza al-Haravi (Soucek, 1987). Mir Abd Allah Mushkin Qalam was a renowned calligrapher during

Jahangir's period. Abdul Haq of Shiraz, who received the title of Amanat Khan from Shahjahan, was the calligrapher of the Quranic inscription on Taj Mahal. These calligraphers worked with different versions of calligraphic styles like, Kufic, Naskh, Muhaqqaq, Taliq, Nastaliq, Thuluth and Tughra (Figure 2). Bihari script is the Indian contribution to calligraphic art. This script had been used to write many manuscripts of Quran. The calligraphers were regarded as the highly skilled artists and had a high place in the imperial court. Most of the time they were also given an authority to chose the text of inscriptions.

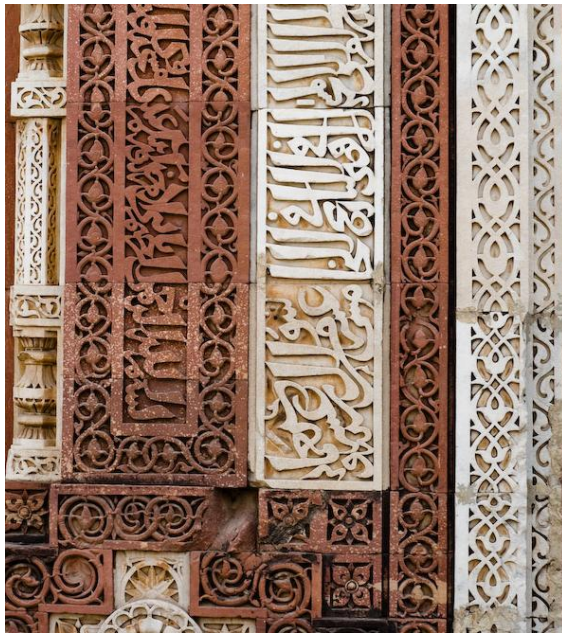


Fig. 1: Early monumental calligraphy on the wall of Alai Darwaza in Delhi  
(Source: <http://bighugelabs.com>)

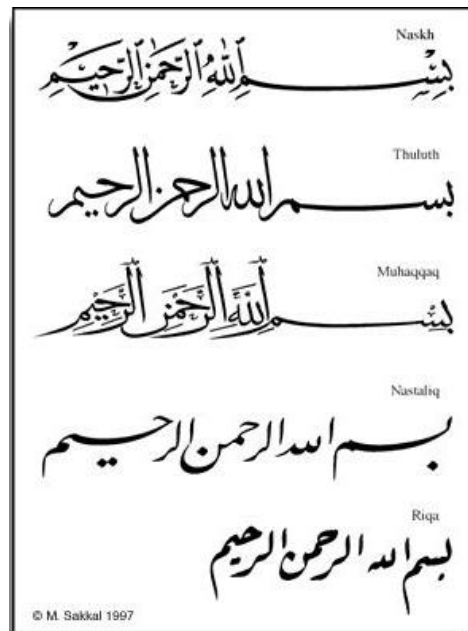


Fig. 2: Different Arabic calligraphic styles  
(Source: <http://blogs.transparent.com>)

## CASE STUDIES

### Qila-e-Kuhna Mosque

During his short tenure Shershah Suri did some marvellous architectural works, one of them is Qila-e-Kuhna mosque at Delhi. The prayer hall which is the only structure remains embellished with contrast scheme of red sandstone and white marble. The monument has fine examples of Quranic inscriptions and white marble inlay work. The prayer hall has five arches at its facade in which the central one is larger in comparison to others. Surah Al-Fath (Surah-48) is engraved at the jamb of central arch where starting two verses are on white marble framed with a border of geometrical pattern, that goes up to dado height. From the third verse of the Surah, the text is continued on red sandstone surrounded by floral pattern, which further bordered with a strip of black stone. In the same way on the other side's jamb where Sura ends, last two verses are inscribed on white marble (Figure 3). The arch north to the central one is embellished with Surah Al-Mulk (Surah-67), inscribed all in red sandstone. Architrave of the arch on the southern side to the central arch bears 20 verses of Surah Al-Muzzammil (Surah-73). In the interior of mosque all bays have decorative niches in qibla wall. The south most and north most niches are decorated with calligraphic arched sandstone panels sandwiched between outer border and inner panel of white marble. All the calligraphic style here is Naskh. The architrave of southern mihrab bears the four verses of Surah Al-Hashr (Surah-59) while arched calligraphy contains Surah Al-Fil and the script is in

Muhaqqaq style (Figure 4). The mihrabs at the northernmost and southernmost seems the work of different calligrapher, it could have been completed later during Humayun's period. The only Kufic inscription is on the north of the central mihrab where Kalima Tayyiba is carved in white marble.



Fig.3: Calligraphy in Thuluth in white marble



Fig.4: Calligraphic band at the arch

### **Buland Darwaza**

In the second half of the Sixteenth century, Emperor Akbar built a new city on small hillock at Sikri and shifted his capital from Agra. The city was built on arcuated system except the mosque, and tomb of Salim Chishti, a native saint of Sikri. After conquering Gujrat Akbar built a victory gate known as Buland Darwaza, a south entrance to the great mosque of Fatehpur Sikri. The gate has beautiful inscription in carved relief work on sandstone (Figure- 5). The calligraphy is in Thuluth script and the calligrapher mentioned his name on the right jamb of the gate as 'Husain bin Ahmad al Chishti' (Figure-6). The calligrapher's signature is at the beginning of script on a separate panel in contrast to the other works where the signature is marked on the last panel. The inscription is from the Surah Az-Zumar(Surah-39). The calligraphy starts from the right vertical panel and with the continuity of the text to the horizontal top band and to vertical left band.





Fig.5: Calligraphic band at Buland Darwaza

(Source: <http://picssr.com>)



Fig.6: Signature of Calligrapher.

### Akbar's Tomb

Akbar finalised the plan of his tomb during his lifetime only, but later his son Jahangir made many changes to the original form. Elegant white marble ornamentation at the entrance gate to the tomb shows Jahangir's intervention. The inscriptions on facades of the gate are in both in Persian and Arabic languages. It contains the praising words for emperor, modified quotations from Quran and on the last panel name of the calligrapher with date, Abdul Haq Shirazi in 1022A.H. (1613AD). The inscription is carved on white marble with Thuluth script. The inner grave chamber has no inscription with plain cenotaph of the emperor. Vestibule before grave chamber has a long calligraphic band near ceiling in golden colour with blue background in stucco (Figure 7). The inscription is in Thuluth script having portions from Surah Al-Mulk (Surah-67), Surah Al-Ahzab (Surah-33) and Surah As-Saffat (Surah-37).



Fig.7: Calligraphy at Akbar's Tomb, Agra  
(Source: <http://10yearitch.com>)

### Tomb of Itmad-Ud-Daula

Nur Jahan, the wife of Jahangir commissioned to build a mausoleum for her father, Itmad-ud-Daula at Agra. The building indicates transition from the Akbar's red sandstone to Shahjahan's white marble buildings. The central arch of the tomb has a band of white marble with relief work of calligraphy. There are nine panels of Arabic inscription on each facade and one panel on every side of polygonal minaret at the same level (Figure 8). It bears verses of Surah Al-Fath (Surah-48) and Surah Al-Muzzammil (Surah73). At the end of the Surah a panel bears the name of calligrapher as Abd al Nabi al Quraishi (Figure 9).

The panel at the central arch of south facade is without inscription. The upper floor is embellished with Surah Al-Mulk (Surah-67). The inscriptions are in Thuluth script finely carved on white marble.



Fig.8: Calligraphy at Itmad-ud-Daula tomb  
(Sorce-Mohaisen, 2002)



Fig.-9: Signature of Calligrapher  
(Sorce- Hussein, 2016)

### Taj Mahal

Taj Mahal, a magnificent and marvellous piece of Mughal architecture, often mentioned as the symbol of love by poets in all the ages. The building in white marble is not only famous for its composition of masses and the material but its well versed decoration with arabesques, geometrical patterns and calligraphy. At the southern arch of the interior of the tomb, a signature was marked with date by the calligrapher mentioned himself as 'Amanat Khan Shirazi' (Figure 10). The calligrapher had already been worked for Akbar's tomb where he mentioned his real name 'Abdul Haq' while signed on an inscription at its gateway. Most of the inscriptions are Persian at Akbar's tomb in comparison to Taj where the inscriptions are from Quranic verses. It is presumed that the selection of verses and surah to be inscribed on the monuments was done by the calligrapher (Begley, 1975). The calligraphy at Taj looks well coordinated with its plan and elevation so that the inscriptions become integrated part of the scheme. Though not mentioned in the contemporary construction techniques but the whole building clearly seems to be designed on a modular system (Balasubramaniam, 2010). The themes of the selected passages of Quranic verses are about the day of judgement, paradise for the true followers, rewards to the faithful and divine mercy of Allah (Figure 11). These themes suits the function of the tomb and recall and communicate the viewer to the world hereafter (Koch, 2005). The black calligraphic verses are inlaid into the white marble. On the southern gateway to the tomb first 21 verses of Surah Yaseen (Surah-36) are inscribed. The marble jaali encloser contains the cenotaph of Mumtaz Mahal at the centre and Shahjahan's was buried later to adjacent to her. The asymmetrical position of Shahjahan's cenotaph shows that Shahajahan was not planned to be buried here. The tiered sides of cenotaph of Mumtaz Mahal are ornamented with floral patterns while the top is embellished with calligraphy framed with floral border. The top of cenotaph of Shahjahan along with its tiered sides are decorated with floral patterns. The calligraphy at Taj Mahal is the climax of the art work in the Mughal architecture.

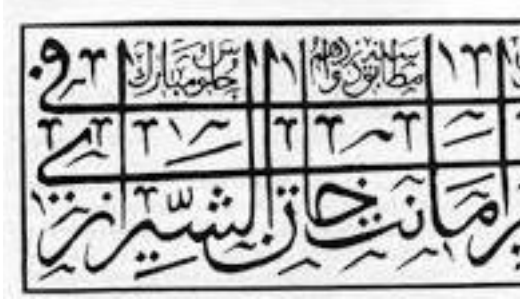


Fig.10: Signature of Calligrapher  
(Source: <http://blog.chughtaimuseum.com>)



Fig.11: Calligraphy at Taj mahal  
(Source: <http://cecilimages.photoshelter.com>)

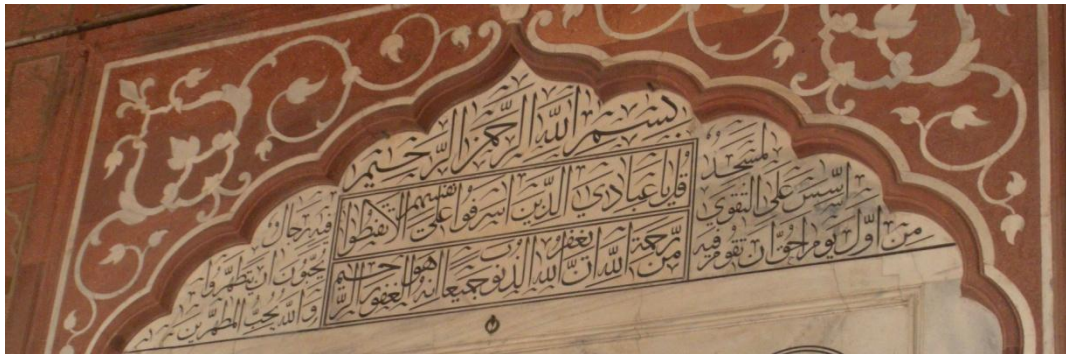


Fig.12: Calligraphy at Jami Masjid, Delhi.

### Jami Masjid Delhi

Shahjahan shifted his capital from Agra to Delhi in 1638 and planned a new city named Shahjahanabad. The Jami Masjid was proposed near bazaar to serve the population of the city. Masjid was constructed on a raised platform having three sides arched gateways at the centre of each iwan approachable through pyramids of steps. The prayer hall is independent from the surrounding cloisters and framed with the help of four stories tall minarets. Central arch of facade of prayer hall is flanked by five comparatively smaller arches. The spandrels of the central arch are embellished by medallions in black stone inlaid in white marble. The medallions bears one of the names of Allah 'Ya Hadi' repeated eight times and arranged in radial fashion so that 'Alif' makes an octagonal star at the centre. In the same way the spandrels of arch at the central mihrab bears a medallion of other name of Allah 'Ya Ghaffar'. They are written in Tughra design of Thuluth script. All the ten small arches have inscriptions above on white marble panels inlaid with black stone. They bear information regarding the history of building, construction duration, cost, name of builder and calligrapher. These panels bear Persian prose and Quranic verses. On the central mihrab verses from Surah Az-Zumar (Surah-39) and Surah At-Tawba (Surah-9) are chosen very wisely for the occasion as they explain the significance of mosque for the believers and mercifulness of Allah. (Figure 12) The name of the calligrapher mentioned as Nur Allah Ahmad at the lower left of the last panel on the southernmost side.

Table 1: Details of calligraphic styles and techniques in different monuments.

Monument	Year	City	Calligraphic Style	Technique	Material	Verses from Surah of Quran	Calligrapher
Qila-e-Kuhna	1540	Delhi	Kufic, Muhaqqaq and Naskh	Carved relief	Red Sandstone, White marble	Surah Al-Mulk, Al-Muzzammil, Al-Hashr and Al-Fil	Unknown
Buland Darwaza	1574	Fatehpur Sikri	Thuluth	Carved relief	Sandstone	Surah Az-Zumar	Husain bin Ahmad al Chishti
Akbar's Tomb	1612	Agra	Thuluth	Carved relief	White Marble	Surah Al-Mulk, Surah Al-Ahzab and Surah As-Saffat	Abdul Haq Shirazi
Itmad ud Dalah Tomb	1628	Agra	Thuluth	Carved relief	White Marble	Surah Al-Fath, Al-Muzzammil, Al-Mulk	Abd al Nabi al Quraishi
Taj Mahal	1646	Agra	Thuluth, Nastaliq, Tughra	Inlaid work	White Marble and black stone	Surah Yaseen, Al-Fajr, Ad-Duha, At-Tin, Ash-Sharh, At-Takwir, Al-Infitar, Al-Bayyinah, Al-Mulk, Al-Fath, Al-Insan, Ash-Shams, Al-Ikhlash	Amanat Khan
Jami Masjid	1649	Delhi	Thuluth, Tughra	Inlaid work	White marble with black stone	Surah Az-Zumar, At-Tauba	Nur Allah Ahmad

## RESULTS

During pre Mughal period in North India, the Kufic inscriptions were dominated which continued to early Mughal period with its different forms. While Naskh and Muhaqqaq were also trending parallel and later they surpassed the Kufic script. Due to Humayun's long stay in Persia in refuge many Persian calligrapher reached India and Thuluth script was enriched on Indian monuments. Hereafter the calligraphy reached to its peak in North India as many examples of Tughra design in Thuluth also embellished the monuments. Nastaliq was used only for Persian inscriptions. In the early Islamic period red sandstone was chief material used for calligraphic purpose. With the advent of Mughals, use of white marble increased as decorative material for arabesque and calligraphy. During Jahangir's period, which is presumed as a transition from red sandstone to white marble, the use of white marble was abounded. It reflected the calligraphic art also, as resulted into the intricate and fine examples of the inscriptions. Carved relief on stone was the technique used for calligraphy till the white marble became the chief finishing material. Black stone cut-outs of words were inlaid into white marble to emphasise the visual quality of calligraphy. Arabic inscriptions on these tombs and mosques are generally from Quran and chosen carefully according to function and purpose of the building. The Quranic verses on the surface of monuments were either symbolic or signifying the importance of the building. In the beginning the calligrapher did not use to mention their names but later they marked their signature generally at the end of script or on a different panel before starting of script.

## CONCLUSION



Worshipping only one God, rejection of idolization and discouraging adoration of imagery resulted in a non-figurative ornamentation in Islamic art. Arabesque, geometric patterns and calligraphy were the alternatives to embellish the pieces of art and architecture in Islam. Arabic calligraphy developed with the revelation of Quran and reached to highest level of art and embellished several Islamic monuments throughout the world. In India this art was developed and promoted by Muslim rulers and reached at its zenith during Mughal period. The finest examples of this art could be seen in Taj Mahal. Six representative buildings of Mughal architecture show its aesthetic value, the stylistic development, techniques and symbolic function of monumental calligraphy. Table-1 explicitly explains the Calligraphic styles, techniques and material used in six representative Mughal monuments of different periods. On one hand this study contributes to the literature gap and on the other hand it provides a basis for conservation architects to restore the calligraphy on Mughal monuments in North India. It will also help the architects to design proportionate and justified calligraphy type in modern buildings as it is still associated with Islamic architecture.

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